

GILBERT RYLE'S CRITICISM OF DESCARTES' CONCEPT OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

The crucial concept of the philosophy of mind is consciousness. The problem of consciousness is one of the fundamental problems of humanity. Rene Descartes maintained that consciousness or thinking is the essence of mind or soul. For him, mind is a substance and different from body and it can exist without the body. But Gilbert Ryle criticized Descartes' concept of consciousness and called it to be a myth. The aim of this paper is to analyze and compare the views of both the philosophers in order to show how far Ryle's criticism justified against Descartes' consciousness in western perspective.

KEYWORDS: Consciousness, Criticism, Essence, Mind

INTRODUCTION

The task of the discipline known as philosophy of mind is to make a philosophical study of mind including different mental concepts that involve mind. In "Philosophy of Mind" we make a conceptual study of different mental concepts. One of the significant problems that have been dealt with in philosophy of mind is whether there is some attribute that all of these mental phenomena have in common? Or what is the criterion of the "mental"? It is often maintained that the essence of the "mental" consist of the states of consciousness taken as subjective experience. In his Meditations Descartes first proved that his essence is thinking or consciousness and established the primacy of mind in his famous "cogito-ergo-sum". Descartes is called the father of modern philosophy who has interpreted the problem of mind and consciousness and philosophers after him have followed his path. Even contemporary and recent discussion on consciousness includes Descartes' view either in support or against.

Descartes' Concept of Consciousness

In search of certainty in philosophical knowledge Descartes applied the method of doubt and found that everything can be doubted but the existence of himself, the doubting authority can't be doubted. After having made it clear that he exists, Descartes tried to find out what he is. He found that he is nothing but a thinking thing. From the scrutiny of his nature or essence Descartes found that his essence is thinking or consciousness. It is because he is aware of himself when and only when he is aware of thinking. He has a clear and distinct perception of himself as solely as a thinking thing. In Descartes' words: simply from knowing that I exist, and that meantime, I do not observe any other thing as evidently pertaining to my nature, i.e., my essence, except this only, that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists in this alone, that I am a thinking thing (i.e., a substance, the whole nature or essence of which consists in thinking)."¹

According to Descartes, “thinking is nothing other than “consciousness”. In his meditation-II, he made it clear that he is nothing but a thinking thing and a thinking thing is that which is having conscious activities like doubting, understanding, willing, sensing etc; that is, consciousness. As he says, “what then is it that I am? A thinking thing, what is a thinking thing? It is a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, abstains from willing, that also can be aware of images and sensations.”² The entity which has consciousness is the subject of consciousness. For Descartes, the mind is the subject of consciousness or thinking, for the mind is a thinking thing. When the mind is regarded as the subject of thinking or consciousness, here the thinking includes all phenomena that can be called the mental. Being the subject of consciousness the mind is distinct from the body. It is distinct as an un-extended and conscious thing.

In his famous article “Descartes’s proof that his essence is thinking” Norman Malcolm analyses how Descartes established the fact that thinking or consciousness is the essence of mind. According to Malcolm, Descartes proved by his “cogito, ergo sum” that his existence is certain and indubitable, but “it is more difficult to understand how he moves from the thesis that since he thinks therefore his existence is certain, to the thesis that his existence is certain, to the thesis that his nature is nothing but thinking and he is entirely distinct from body”³ Malcolm proposes that Descartes’s doctrine that his essential nature is thinking is based on a line of thought, not explicitly stated but suggested in various passage, which does have an expressive appearance of cogency. For him, if we attribute this line of thought to Descartes we shall find it easily intelligible that the lucid philosopher should have drawn the conclusion that he was “a substance the whole essence or nature of which is to think.”⁴

Further, he tried to localize the mind or soul as the subject of consciousness. In “the passions of the soul”, Descartes describes that the thinking subject sits in the pineal gland of the brain and controls its activities. Here he makes the following statements regarding the mind or soul and its location: (1) The mind is united to all the parts of the body and cannot be said to exist in any one to the exclusion of others (Part I, article-30); (2) It exercises its functions immediately only in the pineal gland, for it is the only single organ which for example can unify the two figures formed by two eyes into one coherent picture (Part –I, article-31). (3) It radiates throughout the body from the pineal gland by means of the animal spirit. (Part –I, article-34)

Descartes made a survey of the human body so that he can find out actually from where the conscious mind controls his actions and found that the pineal gland is the seat of the mind or soul. For him, the heart or the whole brain can not be the seat of the mind for, the soul can immediately exercise its functions only through the pineal gland of the brain. Consciousness and body are independent. The body is divisible while mind or consciousness is indivisible. Moreover, mind or consciousness is having no parts, it is a single thing. On the other hand, body is having parts and therefore divisible. Descartes’ localization of the mind or soul in the pineal gland of the brain seems to be incorrect. According to Wilder Penfield, to suppose that consciousness or mind has localization is a failure to understand neurophysiology. But Descartes was very close to that part of the brain in which the essential circuits of the highest brain mechanism must be active to make consciousness possible.⁵ H.D. Lewis maintains that Descartes was not in error on a philosophical matter or seriously confused philosophically in what he had to say about the pineal gland. He was simply informed about physiological matters, and that was not surprising when systematic study of the body was still in its infancy, Descartes himself helping much to stimulate it.⁶

It is to be noted that mind or consciousness can not arise from the body for, the very nature of mind and consciousness is diverse from the body. We can not conceive of the mind and consciousness to be arisen from the

disposition of the body. Descartes firmly declares that "As mind is of a nature diverse from body, and from the disposition of body; and can not arise from this disposition, therefore, it is incorruptible."⁷ According to Descartes, mind and body are really distinct from each other for, they can exist apart from the other. As he says, "Two substances are said to be really distinct, when each of them can exist apart from the other."⁸ Thus Descartes believes that mind can exist without the body which implies that there may be disembodied survival of mind and consciousness. Mind or consciousness can survive after the destruction of the physical body. Hence, the mind or soul is immortal. Although the mind is very different from the body and can exist without it, yet mind is closely related to the body. For him, mind is not a pilot in the ship but intimately conjoined to make a unitary whole. Thus we do not say that I am a body and a soul, but we refer to ourselves merely as a human being. In his meditation-VI, Descartes express his view rather clearly thus: "Nature also teaches me by this sensing of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., that I am not lodged in my body merely as a pilot in a ship, but so intimately conjoined, and as it were intermingled with it, that with it I form a unitary whole".⁹

Descartes regarded the animals as automata because they lack consciousness or thought. He finds two basic differences between a man and an animal (automata). Firstly, animal can not use speech or other signs like human beings and they can not reply appropriately to the things that may be said in its presence. Only a conscious mind can use speech or other signs to reply to what are said to him. In Descartes' words, ".....they could never used speech or other signs as we do when placing our thoughts on record for the benefit of others....it never happens that it arranges its speech in various ways, in order to reply appropriately to everything that may be said in its presence, as even the lowest type of man can do."¹⁰ Secondly, animal do not act from their knowledge but they act according to the dispositions of their organs. Only conscious mind can act according to their knowledge. Hence, animal awareness is just the dispositions of their bodies. As Descartes says, ".....although machines can perform certain things as well as or perhaps better than any of us can do, they infallibly fall short in others, by which means we may discover that they did not act of knowledge, but only from the dispositions of their organs."¹¹

Ryle's Criticism

Gilbert Ryle's concept of consciousness is expressed in his famous work "The Concept of Mind" where he has tried to modify the logical geography of the concepts, which are known as mental concepts. He regards the official theories of consciousness and introspection as logical muddles. He has sought to dismiss the age long notions of consciousness. According to Ryle, ordinarily the word 'consciousness' is used in different senses but in none of these senses consciousness has the meaning attributed by philosophers. The senses of consciousness that used in ordinary language are- (a) Consciousness may mean 'to find out or discover', as when we are conscious of some changes in the arrangement of the room. (b) Consciousness can be used to relate the youthful person's embarrassment or puzzlement before elders, as when he starts becoming conscious of his changed physiological features. (c) Consciousness can again mean being aware of one's particular likes and dislikes, tastes and aversions. (d) Sometimes consciousness means 'sensitive' or 'sentient' where unconscious means 'insensitive' or 'anaesthetized'. (e) Consciousness also means 'heeding' as when a person pays no heed to a sensation he can be said to be unconscious of it.¹²

Ryle says that the philosopher's concept of consciousness has relatively little affinity with any of the concept described above. For they invariably use it in the sense of an essence of the mental as opposed to the physical. The concept of consciousness as described by Descartes and his followers is a myth. Ryle criticized Descartes by saying that he has made us to believe in a second status world of consciousness. But there are no occurrences taking place in a second status

world, since there is no such world and consequently no need for special modes of acquainting ourselves with the denizens of such a world. Hence we need not to regard consciousness as a part of the definition of the mental. In other words, consciousness is not the essence of mind. We cannot accept that mental states must be conscious states. Ryle says that if we accept that mental processes must be conscious states then there would be no stopping place; there would have to be an infinite number of onion-skins of consciousness embedding any mental state or process whatsoever. If this conclusion is rejected, as he says, then it will have to be allowed that some elements in mental processes are not themselves things we can be conscious of, namely, those elements which constitute the supposed outermost self-intimations of mental processes; and then, 'conscious' could no longer be retained as part of the definition of the 'mental'.¹³ Regarding Descartes' concept of consciousness Ryle says that we don't require our schools to give separate lessons in thinking, as they do give lessons in computing, translating, swimming, and cricket.¹⁴

Moreover, Ryle maintains that mental processes do not refer to mind or consciousness but they refer to the disposition of some kind of behaviour. For him, mind is nothing but a disposition of a person. There is no such entity, which is called mind. Mind is not a substance at all. When we apply mental concepts we point to body not to mind. We talk about the disposition of some kind of behaviour when we talk about mental process. We cannot enter into one's mind so we have to rely on his behaviour. The mind is what man does. There is not a single activity, which is not related with body. Human behaviour may be in some perspective mind-behaviour and in some perspective bodily behaviour. We are concerned with the explanation of difference of behaviour.

Analysis of Ryle's View

Although Ryle declares that he is not to give new information about minds, he in fact has sought to advance a new theory of mind and mental events. Ryle's theory of consciousness suffers from a number of difficulties. While going to denounce that the philosopher's sense of using consciousness has any affinity with the ordinary use he fails to do so. It is difficult to see how the everyday uses of the term 'consciousness' are fundamentally different from the philosopher's use of the same. The different uses, as shown by Ryle above, mean awareness. The term 'conscious' though used in different contexts is always used in the sense of awareness on the part of the person for whom the term 'conscious' or 'consciousness' is predicated. In this sense consciousness is to some extent private for, one's awareness cannot be shared by others. Ryle identifies consciousness or awareness with disposition of behaviour. But consciousness or awareness cannot be identified with behaviour. If a robot behaves like a man, it cannot be said to be conscious. On the other hand, a paralyzed man cannot behave but still be conscious. Ryle fails to find out the difference between consciousness and behaviour. Consciousness is the presupposition of all assertions and denials. We can doubt everything but we cannot doubt the doubting authority as Descartes showed in his cogito-ergo-sum. To deny consciousness is to commit the philosophical error of denying the obvious. By denying consciousness, Ryle has only strengthened the belief that dispute about what is most evident is the characteristic of philosophical problems. The concept of consciousness is fundamental and cannot properly be defined. If we look into our own being without any materialistic bias we can grasp the non-bodily distinct awareness. Ryle says that consciousness cannot be understood without physical disposition of behaviour. Here we can say that it is difficult to grasp why Ryle pretends to be ignorant of what is fundamental to his own existence while talking about awareness distinct from physical body.

Ryle's attempt to replace consciousness by disposition is untenable. It is because if consciousness is just disposition of behaviour then man becomes a typically behaving body. But even a common man would refuse to be a mere

unconscious body, which will deprive him of his interest in life. If we learned today that our own lives from tomorrow morning on would be this sort, the life of a perfectly behaving body but a perfectly unconscious one, we would suddenly cease to be concerned about it and we would not in the least cling to life on these terms. It is because we cannot for a moment identify ourselves with bodies without consciousness. As C. O. Evans says, "To deny the existence of consciousness seems a paradox, because it seems to imply that we are all unconscious, or that we should look upon ourselves as Cartesian automatons; it seems to imply that we are incapable of feeling and have sense experience."¹⁵ Moreover, Ryle himself would not be agree with the view that his famous work. "The concept of mind" is not a creative work but a disposition of behaviour of a particular body called "Gilbert Ryle". Hence creative works of philosophers, poets, scientists etc. are not mere dispositions of behaviour of particular bodies. It is not a ghost but a conscious mind, which is the creator of all human values, art, literature and religion, of all that is beautiful and sublime in and around us. The task of creating and maintaining such human values cannot devolve on our body, however perfect an organism we might conceive it to be.

Further Ryle keeps all the states of consciousness i.e., thinking, feeling and willing under the same name as "dispositions of behaviour" but he fails to show the differences among them. Ryle seems to be wrong while saying that mind cannot have privileged Access in case of self-knowledge. He tries to prove too much as a general logical thesis for the concept of mind when he says that the sorts of things I can find out about myself are the same as the sorts of things that I can find about others, and that the methods are the same. If the "privileged Access" view of the traditional philosophers is not wholly true, then for precisely the same reasons the "open – Access" view of Gilbert Ryle is equally unacceptable.

Ryle advocates the third person account of the concept of consciousness. For him, one can observe from outside what can be reported by the individuals himself. There is nothing in consciousness, which is not observable in behaviour. Here he seems to overlook the point that even observing behaviour he has continuously to assess them in relation to his own experiences to know whether actions performed are intelligent, well-meaning, thoughtful, imaginative or not. Actually, we observe the behaviour of others and assimilate them to our experiences by reflecting upon them. The third person account of consciousness of Ryle made us to rely on other people's behaviour in order to realize our own consciousness. But we often have doubt about others. Here it is strange that Ryle should have emphasized upon the same method to know ourselves and to know others. It is because we find that in cases where we may have doubts regarding someone else's mental states or operations, we have no reason whatsoever to doubt our own mental states and operations. Hence, J. A. Shaffer rightly points out that the third person accounts will not give us a correct account of mental events.¹⁶

Ryle's formulation of ghost-in-the machine argument against Descartes seems to be untenable. Because man is something more than mere flesh and bone, man is more than mere body and that is the ghost as contended by Ryle. But we may say that the ghost is the machine itself, which can appear to itself as an extremely spiritual sort of thing-even as a disembodied mind. The subject of consciousness is always the subject and never becomes an object. Moreover, Ryle's formulation of category mistake is not applicable to Descartes. Ryle says that it is to commit a category mistake if we think that the "university" exists as the same as its administrative building, the gate, the art's building, the hostel etc. exist. Likewise for him, Descartes committed category mistake while he thought that mental processes exist in the same way as the physical processes exist. But we can say that Descartes has not committed category mistake here. It is because the use of the words 'are', 'occur', 'exist', just do not seem to belong to different logical types when applied to bodies and to minds. Mental processes are real, they 'are' or they go on just as physical ones do. My mind is very different from my body, and to

that extent they exist differently, but I mean substantially the same thing when I say that both exist. My thoughts at the moment are as real (they go on) as the movements of my hands. Further we can show that if anyone is a victim of category-mistake here it must be Ryle himself. For, Ryle thought that the "ghost" and the "mind" belong to the same category. But, in fact, they do not belong to the same category because "ghost" is a creation of our 'mind'; it is an imagination of a physical body without reality. On the other hand, mind is the creator of the ghost and it is realized through our immediate experience. So, he has committed a category - mistake by supposing both of them to be in the same logical types.

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